

Liberty Attack Punctured Pentagon Cover

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

THE PENTAGON HAS REACHED all the way to the moon to find a cover story to explain why the USS Liberty sailed into the Arab-Israeli war.

The Liberty—an electronic ferret ship—got so close to the fighting that Israeli planes and torpedo boats attacked it, killing at least 34 American sailors and wounding another 75.

The tragedy happened June 8, but the official flap is far from over. Already Congressmen, responding to letters from relatives of the dead sailors, are demanding to know why the Liberty was so close to shore.

One official Pentagon explanation is nothing short of ludicrous and the other has been unravelling steadily since it was made the day of the attack.

Defense officials, who, under the rules of their meeting with newsmen June 8 could not be identified, said one reason for the Liberty's position was that the ship was using the moon as a passive reflector in its communications.

Cause for Wincing

HOW HITTING THE MOON, 238,000 miles away, had anything to do with changing the position of the ship by a comparatively minuscule distance was not explained. When pressed for an explanation last week, the Pentagon fell back on "no comment."

One Defense official, who winced at his department's claim, quipped that the Liberty—to keep up with the changing position of the moon—"would have had to sail right across the sands of Sinai."

The story the Pentagon put out in a press release said the Liberty, when attacked, was "approximately 15 miles north of the Sinai Peninsula . . . to assure communications between U.S. Government posts in the Middle East and to assist in relaying information concerning the evacuation of American dependents and other American citizens . . ."

whatsoever. The suggestion that the United States flag was not visible and the implication that the identification markings were in any way inadequate are both unrealistic and inaccurate. The identification markings of U.S. naval vessels have proven satisfactory for international recognition for nearly 200 years."

But it still is a question whether the Liberty was indeed in international waters. One Pentagon source said shortly after the attack that the ship was only 12 miles off El Arish. Israel considers that its territorial waters extend 12 miles. Late last week, Pentagon officials refused to state the minimum number of miles the Liberty was from the Egyptian or Israeli coast before and during the attack.

Goulding's use of the word "plausible" may prove to be the biggest malapropism since the National Aeronautics and Space Agency chose to call the U-2 a missing weather plane.

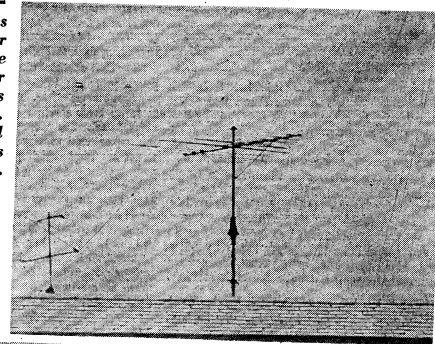
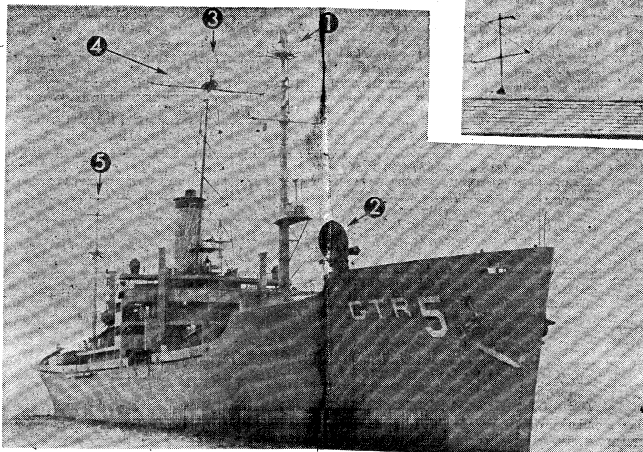
The lid is on, the Pentagon said Wednesday, until a Navy court of inquiry meeting in Valletta, Malta, finishes its investigation of the Liberty incident. The inquiry is expected to take a week.

The inquiry will not stop the unravelling of cover stories, however. Reports already are widespread that the National Security Agency was running things in the bowels of the Liberty, sealing off the electronic specialists it trained in eavesdropping from the regular ship's crew.

The NSA specializes in breaking the military codes of foreign nations as part of its spy work. NSA has an extensive decoding complex at Ft. Meade, Md., and offices behind a high fence in Northwest Washington.

Even the officially cleared photo of the Liberty shows it is basically a ferret ship—not one the Navy would likely send into a war zone just to relay communications about evacuation operations.

The USS Liberty (below), attacked by Israeli planes and boats off the Gaza Strip, is elaborately equipped for eavesdropping. The radio direction finder (1) tells where signals are coming from so the Big Ear radar antenna (2) can tune in on them. Tapes of the signals are usually sent to United States decoding centers. The ship also has an ordinary navigation radar (3) and meteorological instruments (4). Radar gear at (5) in this 1964 picture probably has been modernized.



The high-frequency antenna on the roof of the Pentagon pictured above is the type used for long-distance communications. Most overseas embassies have such equipment. This would be the usual way to coordinate evacuation of civilians—not by a ferret ship like the Liberty, with its specialized spy equipment

19 June Wash Post

Approved For Release 2004/05/25 : CIA-RDP69B00369R000200300004-7

This story was better than the moon-struck one, but failed to explain why—to help with such communications—the ship had to get so close to El Arish and other battle zones at the Mediterranean end of Sinai.

As one distressed Pentagon official put it: "Couldn't that skipper have at least gotten over the horizon?" Former Navy skippers in the Pentagon were frank to forgive the Israelis for not seeing or not believing the identity of the Liberty, and then attacking it.

Possible Excuses

THEIR ARGUMENT is that the American flag on the Liberty might not have been seen if no breeze was blowing and if the Israeli government was not notified in advance that the ship was going into the war zone. With no advance notice, these skippers contend, the Israelis could have figured it was an Egyptian ship—American flag or not. The Pentagon has acknowledged that no advance notice was given.

Phil G. Goulding, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, addressed himself, June 10, to the possibility that the attack was human error, saying:

"We in the Department of Defense cannot accept an attack upon a clearly marked noncombatant United States naval ship in international waters as 'plausible' under any circumstances

A 100-Mile Reach

THE LIBERTY is part of the vast electronic spy system the United States has built since the end of the World War II. Other big powers also have ships, airplanes and satellites to do electronic detective work.

It is vital to know as much as possible about a potential enemy's radar and communications. The Big Ear on the Liberty (see photo) can listen in on communications more than 100 miles away. Technicians in the ship can see the messages on scopes while tape recorders take them down for analysis.

Besides learning what another country is up to through eavesdropping, the Liberty Big Ear could pick up signals another nation uses on its warning radar.

Knowing this, the United States would know the best way to jam such radars in wartime. Foreign nations' radar signals are fed into a computer so they can be referred to quickly in an emergency.

It would have been tremendously tempting for the Navy to send the Liberty off Egypt to see how much the ship's fancy equipment could learn about what was really going on in the war.

This may turn out to be the real reason for her position. No one anticipated that the Liberty and its cover were going to be blown out of the water.

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